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ABSTRACT

A differentiation between two types of self-blame, behavioral and characterological, has been suggested. Behavioral self-blame is control-related and pertains to attributions made to one's behavior, while characterological self-blame is esteem-related and involves attributions made to one's character. To assess the efficacy of separating the attributions of victims of domestic violence into these two categories, and to determine the existence of any relationships between self-blame and help-seeking behavior, 30 women residents of a battered women's shelter were interviewed. The relationships among sex-role beliefs, self-blame, and reasons for staying in an abusive relationship were also examined. The results, when compared to the results of a study examining the effects of the two types of self-blame among victims of sexual harassment (Jensen and Gutek, 1982), revealed that a larger proportion of the domestic violence victims agreed with the behavioral and the characterological self-blame items than did the sexual harassment victims. The sex-role beliefs scale was negatively correlated with the characterological self-blame item suggesting that women with feminist sex-role beliefs would engage in less characterological self-blame. The two measures of behavioral self-blame were correlated, while the correlations between the characterological self-blame item and the behavioral items were not significant. These findings provide support for the differentiation between behavioral and characterological self-blame among victims of domestic violence, a differentiation which is useful because of the different therapeutic implications of each type of self-blame. (NRB)

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Self-Blame and Sex-Role Beliefs in Domestic Violence Victims

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Self-Blame and Sex-Role Beliefs in
Domestic Violence Victims

It has been suggested that a differentiation should be made between two types of self-blame--behavioral and characterological (Janoff-Bulman, 1979). According to Janoff-Bulman, behavioral self-blame is control related and pertains to attributions made to a modifiable source, one's behavior, while characterological self-blame is esteem related and involves attributions made to a more nonmodifiable source, one's character. The distinction is useful in that it resolves the contradictory evidence that self-blame can be a predictor of good coping among accident victims (Bulman and Wortman, 1977) while at the same time being commonly considered a correlate of depression. Janoff-Bulman suggests that "behavioral self-blame may promote a general belief in one's ability to avoid negative outcomes and effect positive outcomes in the future" (p.1800) which is an adaptive response. Characterological self-blame, conversely, involves focusing "more on the past and what it was about them that rendered them deserving of the negative outcome for which they are blaming themselves" (p. 1800), which is a maladaptive response.

Janoff-Bulman found that the distinction between the types of self-blame was useful in explaining the attributions made by rape victims; while the majority of victims of this crime do blame themselves, a very small percentage engaged in characterological self-blame. Other

researchers, however, have been less successful in employing the distinction with other populations. Jensen and Gutek (1982) examined the effects of the two types of self-blame among victims of sexual harassment. They found that while there was a negative relationship between help seeking and behavioral self-blame, no relationship was found with characterological self-blame. In work with self-blame and victims of domestic violence, Miller and Porter (1983) reported difficulty in empirically separating blame attributions into behavioral and characterological facets.

One purpose of this study, then, was to assess the efficacy of separating the attributions of another sample of victims of domestic violence into the two categories, and to determine the existence of any relationships with self-blame and help-seeking behavior. Also, since the literature on rape has found that sex role beliefs have a significant impact on the attribution of responsibility for the act (Field, 1978; Medea & Thompson, 1974), and Walker (1978) suggested that traditional sex role socialization supports the helplessness and perception of lack of control characteristic of many battered women, another purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between sex role beliefs, self-blame, and reasons for staying in an abusive relationship. Based on the conception that behavioral self-blame is control related, one of the expectations was that those subjects with more feminist sex role beliefs would engage in less characterological self-blame than those with traditional beliefs.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were a random sample of women in residence at a shelter for battered women. Of the 35 case numbers chosen at random, 30 interviews were completed for a response rate of 86%. Each subject was individually interviewed within three days of entry into the shelter.

Variables

There were several categories of questions included in the interview. Some questions related to help-seeking behaviors, other questions were included to assess the degree of other-woman blame and self-blame, and there was a group of questions about demographic and relationship characteristics. A sex-role attitude scale developed by Smith, Feree, and Miller (1975) and a checklist of reasons for staying in an abusive relationship were also included.

To assess the degree of other-woman blame, subjects were given four response choices ranging from "disagree strongly," to "agree strongly" to the questions, "When a man physically abuses a woman it is usually because she did something to bring it about," and "A woman who is physically abused could have done something to prevent it," Self-blame was assessed by three questions with the same response format, "Perhaps something in my behavior brought it about," "Perhaps something in my behavior encouraged his behavior," (behavioral self-blame), and "I am the sort of person that this kind of thing is likely to happen to," (characterological self-blame). These operationalizations

were derived from the work of Jensen and Gutek (1982) and chosen for their usefulness in comparison of findings with the previous work.

The items included in the checklist of reasons for staying in an abusive relationship were chosen on the basis of previous research (Martin, 1976; Walker, 1979), and responses to an open-ended item in a pilot study.

Results

The average age of the residents in the shelter was 29 years old. The median number of years in the relationship was four and a half, with 40% of the women having been abused for between two to five years. (See Table 1 for characteristics of the sample).

The victims of domestic violence compared with those of sexual harassment (Jensen & Gutek, 1982) evidenced more self-blame. While only 25.4% and 29.3% of the victims of sexual harassment agreed with the behavioral self-blame items, about half of the victims of domestic violence agreed with the behavioral items (46 % and 50%, respectively). A larger proportion of the victims of domestic violence also agreed with the characterological self-blame item than did those subjects in the sexual harassment study (37.9% compared with 20.9%).

The findings in this study, in contrast with the work of Miller and Porter (1983), provide support for the differientation between behavioral and characterological self-blame among victims of domestic violence. The two measures of behavioral self-blame were correlated, ($r = .45$,

$p < .006$), however, the correlations between the characterological self-blame item and the behavioral items were not significant. Additional evidence for the importance of the distinction between the types of self-blame was provided by the finding that characterclogical self-blame was associated with other-woman blame, whereas behavioral self-blame was generally not associated with other-woman blame (See Table 2). It was also found that the severity of the abuse measured in terms of the frequency and length of time it had been occurring was positively correlated with characterological self-blame but not behavioral self-blame ($r = .36$, $p < .04$).

While Jensen and Gutek (1982) found that those who endorsed the behavioral self-blame items were less likely to have sought help, self-blame was generally not associated with help-seeking among the battered women. There was no relationship between either type of self-blame and reporting the incident to the police, filing charges, or previously leaving the relationship. The only exception to this pattern concerned whether or not the woman had talked with anyone about the violence; those who agreed with the behavioral self-blame item, "perhaps something in my behavior brought it about" were more likely to have talked with one or more persons ($r = .50$, $p < .003$).

The expectation that those subjects with feminist sex role beliefs would engage in less characterological self-blame was supported; the sex role beliefs scale was negatively correlated with the characterological self-blame

item ($r = -.28$, $p < .06$). Consistent with the findings in the rape literature and those obtained by Jensen and Gutek in their study of victims of sexual harassment, sex role beliefs were also associated with blaming the victim. There was a significant negative correlation between other-woman blame and the scale ($r = -.32$, $p < .04$), indicating that those with traditional beliefs were more likely to attribute the responsibility for the abuse to the woman involved than those women with less traditional beliefs.

Sex role beliefs were also associated with a reason for staying in the abusive relationship. A larger proportion of those with traditional beliefs indicated that being afraid to live by themselves was a reason for staying than those with non-traditional beliefs (See Tables 3 and 4 for summary of data on reasons for staying).

Discussion

The support provided for the differentiation between behavioral and characterological self-blame in victims of domestic violence is useful because of the different therapeutic implications of each type of self-blame. If, as the work of Janoff-Bulman and others suggest, behavioral self-blame can be adaptive to the extent that it allows a victim a sense of personal control, then an intervention aimed at emphasizing the personal control and behavior options that one has might be more therapeutic with individuals evidencing this type of self-blame.

Since characterological self-blame is maladaptive to the extent that it is associated with depression and

"learned helplessness", the positive relationship found between this type of self-blame and traditional sex role beliefs suggest that a strategy of encouraging the individual to challenge the validity of their beliefs about women's role and to recognize their rights as individuals might be a useful approach with those with this type of self-blame.

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Table 1

Characteristics of a Random Sample of Residents of a Shelter for Abused Women

Age	(N = 30) x = 29 yrs. median = 29 yrs.	Range = 17 - 37 yrs.
Number of Children	(N = 30) mode = 2 median = 2	Range = 0 - 4
Years in Relationship	(N = 30) x = 5.5 yrs. median = 4.5 yrs. mode = 4 yrs.	Range = 1 - 10 yrs.

How long abuse	(N = 30)	
	Less than 1 month	3.3%
	More than 1 mo. to 3 mo.	6.7%
	More than 3 mo. to 6 mo.	10.0%
	More than 6 mo. to 1 yr.	13.3%
	More than 1 yr. to 2 yrs.	16.7%
	More than 2 yrs. to 5 yrs.	40.0%
	More than 5 yrs.	6.7%
	Only verbal abuse	3.3%
		100%

How often did abuse occur	(N = 30)	
	Every day	6.7%
	About 2-3 times a week	20.0%
	About once a week	23.3%
	Once or twice a month	20.0%
	Less than once a month	26.7%
	One time only	3.3%
		100%

Table 2

Relationship of Self-Blame and

Other-Woman Blame

Agreement with statements	A woman does something to bring about	A woman could have prevented
Behavioral self-blame:		
Perhaps something in my behavior brought it about	.31 *	.09
Something in my behavior encouraged his behavior	.19	.11
Characterological self-blame:		
I am the sort of person this kind of thing is likely to happen to.	.30 *	.42 **

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3

Percentage Checking Each Reason

for Staying in Abusive Relationship

Reason for staying	Percentage checking
I hoped that husband (boyfriend) would change.	86.2%
I loved husband (boyfriend).	72.4%
I had no place to go.	65.5%
I considered husband (boyfriend) a victim and wanted to help him.	62.1%
I was afraid of what he would do if I tried to leave him.	55.2%
Believed that children need a mother and a father.	44.8%
Lacked financial resources and/or employment skills.	41.4%
I was afraid of losing children.	34.5%
I was afraid to live by myself.	31.0%
It's hard to get a job with small children; there are problems with babysitters; etc.	27.6%
Considered divorce a stigma; needed to keep family together at all cost.	20.7%

Table 4

Rank of Reasons Checked

for Staying in Abusive Relationship

Reason for staying	Of those who checked reason, rank given to the reason
Rank 1	
Believed that children need a mother and a father.	41%
I loved husband (boyfriend).	35%
I hoped that husband (boyfriend) would change.	20%
Rank 2	
I hoped husband (boyfriend) would change.	33%
I was afraid of what he would do if I tried to leave him.	27%
Lacked financial resources and/or employment skills.	25%
Rank 3	
I considered husband (boyfriend) a victim and wanted to help him.	41%
I had no place to go.	33%